The Holy Spirit and the Psalms

I once heard someone comment on how open and suggestive is the word “and” in titles like “the Holy Spirit *and* the Psalms.” I shall try to pick up some of the potential of that little word in talking about the Holy Spirit *with* the Psalms, the Holy Spirit *behind* the Psalms, and the Holy Spirit *in* the Psalms.

## The Holy Spirit with the Psalms

First, the Holy Spirit *with* the Psalms. My starting point is an exhortation from Ephesians:

Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and Spirit-songs, singing and making music with your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things. (Eph 5:18-20)

Apparently, when you’re filled with the Spirit, the first thing that will happen is that you speak psalms. Paul goes on to talk about hymns and songs from the Spirit and I imagine he’s referring to praise songs that believers generate, and that praise poems in the New Testament like those of Mary and Zechariah are examples, but when he starts by referring to psalms I assume he means—well, the Psalms. But why would speaking the Psalms be an expression of being filled with the Spirit? A comment Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 12 may point to one answer. “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). To glorify Jesus, to say Jesus is Lord, is not a natural thing. It requires God to do something supernatural in you.

The Psalms declare something parallel to saying “Jesus is Lord.” They proclaim that Yahweh is Lord. Here are some lines from Psalms 95 and 100:

Shout for Yahweh, all the earth,

serve Yahweh with rejoicing,

come before him with resounding. (Psa 100:1)

Yahweh is the great God,

the great king over all gods. (Psa 95:3)

It’s just as controversial a truth as the affirmation that Jesus is Lord. All around you are people who believe that Sennacherib is Lord or that Marduk is Lord. It requires God to do something supernatural in you to enable you to declare that Yahweh is Lord. You have to be full of the Spirit to say that and mean it. The praise in the psalms is expressed by people who are full of the Spirit and the people who use the psalms in their praise have to be people who are full of the Spirit.

In the next chapter of Ephesians Paul goes on,

Pray on every occasion in the Spirit, and to this end stay awake, with all perseverance and petitioning concerning all the saints, and for me. (Eph 6:18-19)

Why does prayer need to be in the Spirit? Maybe part of the answer lies in a comment Paul made earlier, when he speaks of us all having access in one Spirit to the Father (Eph 2:18), which recalls his comment elsewhere that we have received a spirit of adoption by which we cry out “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15). We pray in the Spirit because we then cry out Abba, Father.” What does it look like to cry out, “Abba, Father”? Just after speaking about this cry, Paul talks about the costly nature of his own ministry, and he adds, “as it stands written: ‘For your sake we are put to death all day, we are regarded as sheep for slaughter’” (Rom 8:36). He’s quoting from Psalm 44, a psalm that illustrates the extraordinary freedom and boldness of the prayer in the Psalms. That psalm goes on,

Rise up, why do you sleep, Lord?

– wake up, don’t reject permanently!

Why do you hide your face,

put our humbling and affliction out of mind?

Because our being bows down in the dirt,

our heart clings to the ground.

Get up as our help,

redeem us for the sake of your commitment! (Psa. 44:23-26)

That’s the way you can pray if the Spirit enables you to pray to your Father The praying in the Psalms is done by people who are assured by the Spirit that God is their Father and who are sure of the confidence they can have in approaching their Father in order to batter on his chest and urge him to do something about situations that are intolerable.

That kind of prayer is not only prayer we offer for ourselves. When Paul starts off urging people to pray in Ephesians 6 he is talking about us praying for ourselves, but before he’s done he’s talking about praying about all the saints and asking people to pray for him in connection with his ministry, to pray that he may persist in his ministry even when he’s an ambassador who’s chained up (Eph 6:19-20). In other words, his circumstances are the same as the circumstances that are presupposed by his quoting from Psalm 44 in Romans 8.

Now. Those prayers in the Psalms that lay before Yahweh people’s urgent needs with the confidence of people who know they can approach God in the way they approach their father: I think I can make a reasonable case for the thesis that they prayed that way not just for themselves but for their family, their friends, the other people in their village. Those prayer psalms were their vehicles for intercession as well as for praying for themselves. In other words, Israelites were praying in the Spirit to the Father when they prayed psalms for themselves, and they were also praying in the Spirit to the Father when they prayed psalms for other people.

They were praying in the Spirit when they got angry in their prayers, because anger can be a fruit of the Spirit, even though it may be more characteristically a fruit of the flesh. It’s a converse of the fact that patience is characteristically a fruit of the Spirit but there are times when the Spirit drives us to give up patience. The one occasion when the spirit of God came on Saul, it gave him the gift of anger (see 1 Sam 11). He wasn’t an angry person by nature; he was someone rather reticent and not inclined to push himself forward. He had to be turned into another man in order for Yahweh to turn him into a king. Maybe that was part of the point. You don’t want to appoint as king or president the kind of person who wants to be king or president. But the person you do appoint will need to learn to be more aggressive than he is by nature. The Ammonites have threatened to gouge out the right eye of all the men in Jabesh-in-Gilead, which is across the Jordan in an area the Ammonites would like to take over. It’s when Saul hears about it, returning from a day plowing his fields (you see, by instinct he is just a farmer), it’s then that the spirit of God comes on him in power and he burns with anger. He raises some special forces and puts paid to the Ammonite aggressors. It is his finest moment.

The Psalms often express anger, and it’s one of the signs that they are inspired by the Holy Spirit. The people who pray them need to be full of the Spirit so as to identify with the anger they express. It may be an anger that people feel on their own account, but Saul’s story may suggest that it will more often be an anger that they feel on behalf of other people who are under attack. The anger that the Holy Spirit inspires will then be one that takes hold of God’s own anger and urges him to exercise it. A difference from the Saul story is that the Spirit-inspired anger in the Psalms is simply expressed to God. The presupposition of expressing anger in the Psalms is that it substitutes for expressing your anger by acting against the oppressor. Part of the logic may be that the people who are praying do so out of helplessness. They cannot do anything to effect deliverance for themselves or for the people they’re concerned for. Sometimes they may be in a position to do something, but even then the Psalms imply thy don’t. They leave it to God. The Holy Spirit enables them to do so. They are inspired both by a spirit of anger and by a spirit of patience and self-control.

In speaking about prayer, I have been focusing on the more urgent kind of prayer psalms, the ones that reflect something like despair on the part of the people praying, whether they are praying for themselves or for other people. But the prayer psalms sit on a spectrum that runs from despair to trust. It’s not that the situations they reflect are necessarily different, but that the way people cope with the situations are different. Now elsewhere Paul declares that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, and he can speak of a spirit of faith and a spirit of hope. The psalms of trust, then, are ones inspired by that Spirit, and the people who pray psalms of trust rather than psalms of anguish are people to whom Goh has given a spirit of faith and hope. The implication is not that people who lack a spirit of trust are inferior; it is God who gives the gift of faith. To some he gives simply the gift of freedom to call on him as Father out of their anguish.

It’s easy for Christians to think that the main point about pouring out oneself to God with that freedom is to gain relief from one’s anguish. I take the Psalms to imply that one point about prayer is to gain such relief, but at least as important is the fact that the one to whom we pray is the one who can do something about the need that drives us to pray. He doesn’t always do so, but sometimes he does. The fact that he sometimes does takes us back to Ephesians 5: “Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and Spirit-songs…, giving thanks always for all things.”

The Psalms distinguish between praise and thanksgiving, though they then fudge the distinction, as we do. Strictly, praise acknowledges God for who he is himself and for the great things he has done in delivering Israel and in sending Jesus. Praise is all about God and not at all about me. Thanksgiving tells a story about what God has just done for me. So Psalm 30:

I will exalt you, Yahweh, because you put me down,

but you did not let my enemies rejoice about me.

Yahweh my God,

I cried for help to you, and you healed me.

Yahweh, you got my life up from She’ol,

you kept me alive from going down into the Cistern.

Make music for Yahweh, you who are committed to him,

confess his sacred commemoration,

Because there’s a moment in his anger,

a life in his acceptance.

In the evening crying lodges,

but at morning there’s resounding.

There’s a significant link between an odd feature of that kind of psalm and an odd feature of Paul’s exhortation that I just quoted again. Jesus warns us about praying in a way designed for other people to hear (Matt 6:5). Paul tells us to pray in a way designed for other people to hear, and the Psalms model this aspect of prayer. Psalm 30 is one of the many psalms that both address God and address other people. The first three lines of Psalm 30 do the first, the next three lines do the second. So it’s the first three lines that are really thanksgiving. The next three are testimony. The genius of this type of psalm is that dual nature. It glorifies God by telling other people what God has done. It upbuilds other people by glorifying God for what he has done. Paul’s bidding people who are filled with the Spirit to speak to one another with Psalms and to give thanks fits with the dual nature of the Psalms themselves. They had issued from people who were filled with the Spirit in order to give thanks to God and to give their testimony, and they are there in the Psalter so that they can be used by people who are filled with the Spirit, as they give thanks to God and give their testimony.

The fudging of the distinction between praise and thanksgiving means that when the Scriptures exult in who God is and in the great things God has done for Israel and in Jesus, they can speak not only in terms of praise but also in terms of giving thanks, and who could complain at their doing so? The fudging also finds expression in the combination of address to God and address to other people, which comes in the kind of praise psalms I began from, as well as in thanksgivings. So Psalm 97 addresses Yahweh:

You, Yahweh, are the One on High over all the earth,

you have ascended very high over all the gods. (Psa 97:9)

Psalm 98 addresses other people:

Sing for Yahweh a new song,

because he has performed extraordinary deeds!

His right hand has wrought deliverance for him,

yes, his sacred arm. (Psa 98:1)

Praise like thanksgiving draws in other people because it thereby builds them up.

The Holy Spirit with the Psalms. Second, the Holy Spirit behind the Psalms.

## The Holy Spirit behind the Psalms

Why would the Holy Spirit want the church to use the Psalms in its worship and prayer rather than simply enabling it to devise its own Spirit-inspired prayer and praise? Perhaps one answer to that question is that the Holy Spirit was involved in the origin of the Psalms.

Now the Psalms are the most obviously human of the Scriptures in the sense that they represent what human beings wanted to say to God. They’re not like messages that the Holy Spirit put on the mouth of Prophets, which the Prophet received rather than generated. They’re not like the rules that the Torah puts forward as dictated by God to Moses. They represent what some human beings wanted to say to God.

Psalm 88 cries out in these words:

Yahweh, why do you reject me,

why hide your face from me?

I’m afflicted, breathing my last since youth;

I’ve borne your dreads, I despair.

Your acts of rage have passed over me,

your acts of terror have destroyed me.

They are round me like water all day,

they’ve encircled me altogether.

You’ve taken friend and neighbor far from me,

my acquaintances – darkness. (Psa 88:14-18)

I assume, then, that these are words someone wanted to say to God in their affliction and that this person made up the words, and/or that someone else made up the words on behalf of such a person or such people. The inclusion of such a prayer in the Scriptures indicates that the people of God then thought it provided a model for prayer. The people of God made it part of its canon of Scriptures. By implication, the people of God recognized that it was the kind of thing one could properly say to God. How could that be the case, with a prayer that speaks of having been abandoned by God? If I may connect some dots, I suggest that such a prayer issues from the groaning of the Holy Spirit who speaks from within a believer whom God has abandoned, so that God appeals to God in such a prayer. That was one of the ways the Holy Spirit was involved in the prayers and praises represented in the Psalter. The Holy Spirit is behind those prayers and praises.

That statement did involve my connecting some dots. Here’s a more explicit New Testament comment on the Holy Spirit’s being behind the Psalms. There was an occasion when the believers gathered in Jerusalem after the arrest of Peter and John and their marvelous release. They joined together in praise, and in their praise they quote the opening of Psalm 2:

Why have nations crowded together,

and peoples murmur about something empty,

Earth’s kings take a stand,

leaders made plans together,

against Yahweh and against his anointed?

What interests us here is that they introduce the quotation with the words, “You who spoke through the Holy Spirit by the mouth of our father David, your servant” (Acts 4:25). Why the reference to the Holy Spirit being behind the psalm? There are two things to note. First, Psalm 2 is one of a small minority of Psalms that speak directly not from us to God but from God to us. You could say that in that sense, the Holy Spirit indeed inspired those words. In form they are more like a prophecy. But second, when the New Testament refers to the Holy Spirit’s being behind the Scriptures, it has something else in mind. For the believers in Acts 4, the striking thing was that this psalm that was composed hundreds of years ago spoke directly to the experience they’d just been through. It was as if it had them in mind. Indeed it did, not because the human author anticipated it, but because the Holy Spirit did.

Now. The Holy Spirit inspired those words to speak to a particular context in Israel’s life all those years before, and it’s worthwhile to seek to hear them in that context. Their meaning in that context is their real meaning. But the way I like to think of it is that the Holy Spirit inspired those words with a twinkle in his eye, because he knew they were going to be strangely appropriate in connection with another circumstance hundreds of years later. The implication is, when strange things happen, don’t be surprised if the Holy Spirit inspired something in a psalm that speaks directly to your situation.

In a prayer group to which I belong, we begin each week by reading a psalm, and we’ve been reading through the psalms sequentially since we started. Last week we met in the context of some deep conflict in the wider group of which we’re part. Now the next psalm in the sequence happened to be 129, which begins, “They have greatly attacked me,” and goes on to speak of the plowers plowing my back. It seemed a bit pointed in the circumstances, and the leader of our meeting was inclined to look for a different psalm that matched the situation, but I encouraged her to stick with the order though to add 130, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.” But then when she started with 129 with that talk of attack I realized that we were indeed under attack—not in that people were attacking one another, though that has happened, but that we are under attack from outside, supernatural attack. The Holy Spirit was behind the author of Psalm 129 so as to speak to us in our tricky and distressing situation.

Hebrews makes a similar point in an even more striking way. It is concerned about some aspects of the faith and life of the congregation that it addresses, and in this connection it reminds the congregation of the last part of Psalm 95:

Today, if you listen to his voice,

8don’t toughen your mind as you did at Meribah [Argument],

As on the day at Massah [Testing] in the wilderness,

9when your ancestors tested me.

They tried me, though they’d seen my action;

10for forty years I loathed the generation.

I said, ‘They’re a people who go astray in mind,

and they—they have not acknowledged my ways,

11Of whom I swore in my anger,

“If they come to my place to settle down….”’

So far Psalm 95. What interests us here is the way Hebrews leads into those verses. It introduces them with the words, “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit *says*” (Heb 3:7). In Acts, the believers referred to something God *said* through the Holy Spirit, when those words were first uttered. In Hebrews the Holy Spirit is *saying* the words now. That’s how real is the sense that the Holy Spirit lay behind them. The twinkle in his eye back then meant he is looking now. His involvement with those words is present as well as past.

There is a further point worth making. In Anglican and Episcopal Prayer Books, Psalm 95 has a prominent place. No psalm is prescribed for use more often. In particular, it comes just before we read the Scriptures, so that this reading is introduced by the psalm’s exhortation to listen to God’s voice. Ironically, however, it long ago became customary to leave out the last part of the psalm. It’s ironic if I’m right that the logic of using the psalm at that point in worship lay in this last part of it, and it’s ironic because it’s this last part of the psalm that distinguishes it from other praise psalms, and it’s ironic because it’s this part that Hebrews quotes and then spends a couple of chapters expounding. When I get students to study this psalm, they’re inclined to question whether God really loathes people in the way the psalm says. It sounds like one of those nasty Old Testament ideas that the New Testament gets beyond. There is therefore a fourth irony in the fact that Hebrews quotes it.

The Holy Spirit speaks this psalm to congregations of believers. The link between the Holy Spirit and the Psalms lies not only in the Spirit inspiring us to use the Psalms in worship, prayer, and thanksgiving, but in the Holy Spirit’s being behind them and in the Spirit’s own using them as a manual of instruction on God’s relationship with us.

They are not only a manual on God’s relationship with us. The New Testament also treats them as a manual on understanding God and the gospel and on the future and mission and ministry and spirituality and right living. And of course they are a manual on understanding Jesus. Jesus himself takes up a psalm on the cross and cries out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” And the New Testament follows his example and applies this psalm and others to him. The idea is not that Psalm 22 was a prophecy, as if it were not a prayer that Israelites prayed when God had abandoned them. But the Holy Spirit knew when he inspired this groan from within a Israelite that it was going to be especially apposite on Jesus’ lips. He was behind this groan all right.

The Holy Spirit behind the psalms.

## The Holy Spirit in the Psalms

I come thirdly to the Holy Spirit *in* the Psalms, to the way the Psalms themselves talk about the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, the actual phrase Holy Spirit comes only in Isaiah 63 and in Psalm 51. One should not make too much of this statistic. The more common Old Testament expression “spirit of God” in effect means “Holy Spirit.” Further, the context of the use of the phrase in Psalm 51 is suggestive. In three successive lines in the psalm, we ask,

Renew a steadfast spirit within me….

Don’t take your holy spirit from me….

May your generous spirit sustain me. (Ps. 51:10-12)

It’s amusing to see the way translations don’t know what to do about capital letters for the expression holy spirit in the middle of those three lines. Shall we use a capital H and a capital S? Shall use lower case h and lower case s? Or shall we compromise and have lower case h and upper case S? The placing of the phrase holy spirit between those other expressions, established spirit and generous spirit, reflects the fact that “holy spirit” is not yet a technical term, and both of the other two phrases refer what we would call the third person of the Trinity just as much as the middle one does. The psalm draws our attention to the fact that the Holy Spirit is also the steadfast or persistent spirit and the generous spirit.

The psalm also implies an intrinsic link between the human spirit and the divine spirit, though that is a paradoxical assertion. Isaiah 31 declares that “the Egyptians are human not God, their horses are flesh and not spirit” (Isa. 31:3). In other words, “human” can be naturally set over against “spirit,” to signify weak over against powerful. Spirit stands for the power of the wind and the liveliness that humanity doesn’t possess unless God breathes it in. But God does breathe it in. God breathes into us his steadfast or persistent, holy, generous spirit, to make us steadfast, holy, generous people.

The psalm also raises the question whether God might take that spirit away from us. And it seems to me obvious that God does so. The Pentecostal movement was a moment when God gave his Spirit back after he had taken it away, but you can’t assume that he will take it away again, and leaders like you are just the kind of people who need to be wary of exercising the kind of leadership that makes God do so. Psalm 104 addresses God about living things in general,

You hide your face, they’re fearful;

you gather up their spirit, they breathe their last,

and go back to their dirt.

30You send out your spirit, they’re created,

and you renew the face of the ground. (Psa 104:29-30)

Psalm 143 speaks in related terms. On one hand, it pleads out of the distress of the human spirit and the fear or the actuality of God’s face turning away:

My spirit has fainted away within me;

my mind is desolate inside me….

Be quick, answer me, Yahweh;

my spirit is finished.

Don’t hide your face from me,

so that I shall be like the people who go down into the Cistern. (Psa 143:4, 7)

Then it pleads,

Teach me to do what’s acceptable to you,

because you are my God.

May your good spirit lead me,

on level ground. (Psa 143:10)

God’s spirit is good, and because it is good, it leads on level ground.

Alongside the question whether the Holy Spirit can be withdrawn is the question raised by Psalm 139, the question of whether we can find ourselves outside the Spirit’s reach.

7Where could I go from your spirit,

where could I take flight from your face?

8If I were to go up to the heavens, you would be there;

if I were to make She’ol my bed – there you would be. (Psa 139:7-8).

Christian usage regularly takes the psalm as an encouragement. We needn’t worry, we will never be out of the Spirit’s reach. But the context of the psalm suggests a different implication. If we are not the kind of people who hate evil, if we rather compromise over evil, then we will be the kind of people who need to get away from God’s reach, and we may then find that we want to get out of the reach of God’s spirit but that we can’t. It’s the last part of the psalm that makes clear that this is the implication of saying that we can never get away from God’s Spirit; the first part is simply statement of fact, and so if you’re not the kind of person who needs to flee from God’s spirit, you can appropriate the positive reading of the first part of the psalm. Which points me to the further comment, that seeing how the link between the Psalms and the Holy Spirit applies to us is itself a process that requires the Spirit’s discernment.

There’s one further matter that I should mention. Christians often assume that the Spirit wasn’t operating in Israel in Old Testament times. In the context of his own ministry Jesus says that the Spirit wasn’t there yet (John 7:39). But in light of things the Old Testament says about the Spirit, he can hardly be implying that the Spirit wasn’t active in Israel, and the existence of the Psalms suggests he can hardly be implying that the Spirit wasn’t active in its worship. It would then be impossible to explain the existence of the Psalms. They were written by people who were inspired by the Spirit and they could be used only by people who were full of the Spirit.

So what was new about the coming of the Holy Spirit in the upper room and at Pentecost? I have three answers. The first is that the Spirit is now the missional Spirit. Jesus’ breathing the Holy Spirit on the disciples related to their being sent out as Jesus was, to forgive people (John 20:21-23). At Pentecost the pouring out of the Holy Spirit happened in the context of the gospel’s being translated into the languages of the nations. The Holy Spirit is now the missional spirit; that’s what’s new. Yet paradoxically, it’s already implicit in the link between the Holy Spirit and the Psalms, because the Psalms are the book in the Old Testament most concerned about the nations recognizing Yahweh. When the Holy Spirit inspires people to pray the Psalms, they are calling the entire world to worship Yahweh, and the Holy Spirit is being the missional spirit.

The second answer is that Pentecost also represents an outpouring of the Spirit with exciting new features. The third is that it represents an outpouring that reverses a withdrawing of the Spirit, an example of the way the outpouring of the Spirit comes in waves that ebb and flow. And if in much of the Western world we experience ebb, we can trust and pray that we will once again experience flow.

Be gracious to us, God, in accordance with your commitment.

Don’t take your holy spirit from us.

May your generous spirit sustain us.

Renew a steadfast spirit within us.